



GAIL FISHER / Los Angeles Times

Hien Nguyen surveys Talbert Lake in Huntington Beach's Central Park, where bulldozing was conducted in attack on rats and mosquitoes.

Concern for Bird Life Sparks Investigations of Marsh Bulldozing

By LANIE JONES, Times Staff Writer

As Huntington Beach officials saw it, their mid-December cleanup was just part of park maintenance. Saying that an inlet of Talbert Lake harbored rats and was a breeding ground for thousands of mosquitoes, they bulldozed willow trees, cattails and bushes from three acres of marshland in the city's central park.

But local Audubon Society members are outraged, claiming the city has destroyed an oasis for birds, one of the best

Fish and Wildlife Service's Laguna Niguel office, on Tuesday declared that the bulldozing appears to have proceeded without required federal and state permits, constituted unauthorized fill of a wetland and destroyed part of a "riparian habitat within the park that supports one of the largest and densest concentrations of passerine migrants [migrant songbirds] anywhere in Orange County, or for that matter, the Western United States."

If it is determined that the city acted without permits, it could be forced to restore the habitat.

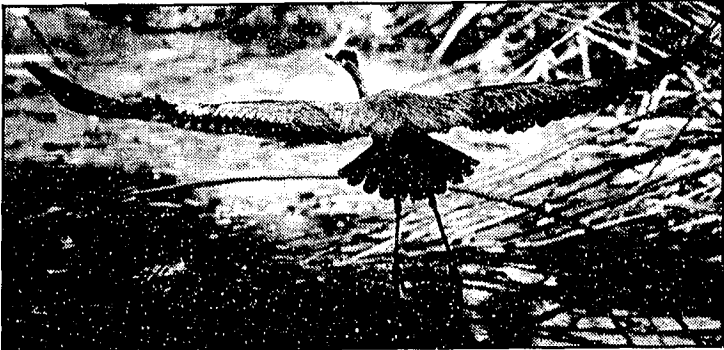
According to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologists, more than 40 species of birds regularly breed within the marsh and more than 200 species have been sighted there in the last four years, including American lesser goldfinches, bushtits, northern orioles, warbling vireos, hermit warblers, cinnamon teal and ruddy ducks. In addition, a small songbird called the least Bell's vireo, on both state and federal endangered species lists, was sighted in the park in the fall of 1985.

Riparian habitat—wildlife habitat adjacent to a river, pond or lake—is increasingly rare in Southern California, federal biologists said.

"Southern California has lost over 80% of riparian areas that were once existing," Kaufman said. As their habitat has become limited, the species that used to live in those areas have been declining, too.

Loren Hays, an avid bird watcher and the Fish and Wildlife Service biologist who discovered the bulldozing, said many birds displaced by the parks' bulldozing.

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Cindy Anderson and daughter Kristin, 2, explore park's Black Bird Pond. Above, great blue heron lifts off from marsh area, and wildlife official displays marsh plant important to birds and reportedly plowed under in large amounts.



Loren Hays, Fish and Wildlife Service biologist

'It seems they [Huntington Beach city officials] have declared war on vegetation.'

bird-watching sites and one of the last freshwater marshes in Southern California.

Echoing the bird watchers' concerns, this week three federal agencies and one state agency—the federal Environmental Protection Agency, the Army Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the state Department of Fish and Game—launched investigations into the city's action.

In a letter of complaint to the other agencies, Nancy M. Kaufman, project leader of the U.S.

Coroner's Aide Says Crash Did Not Appear to Be Pilot Error

By LANIE JONES, Times Staff Writer

The deputy coroner at the scene of a fiery helicopter crash that killed five Tustin Marines said Saturday that he didn't believe the cause was pilot error, because "from what I saw, the aircraft went straight down."

Imperial County Deputy Coroner Donald H. Cole said, "I would imagine if it were pilot error, somebody would have gone ahead, moving forward and would have struck something."

"If he was going forward, then he would make an impression into the dirt. It's desert terrain, soft sand. It would certainly make an impression into the dirt. But from what I saw there was no forward action. All indications I could see—it came from above, straight down."

Lt. Shawn Cooper, a spokeswoman for the El Toro Marine Corps Air Station, said Saturday she could not comment on the cause of the crash. The military investigation could take from six months to a year, she said.

Latest in a String of Accidents

But Thursday's accident was just the latest in a string of accidents and fatal crashes over the last two years involving the Marine Corps' Super Stallion CH-53E helicopter. The helicopters, which cost \$16 million apiece and are the largest helicopters made in the United States, are manufactured by Sikorsky Aircraft Co. of Stratford, Conn. They are known as "the workhorses" of the Marine Corps because each can haul as many as 55 troops.

The crash occurred at about 8:30 p.m. Thursday at the Salton Sea Test Range in the Imperial Valley when a Tustin-based Super Stallion on a routine training mission crashed into the desert and burned. Killed were the pilot, Maj. David J. Brandenburg, 34, of Mission Viejo and his crew of four: co-pilot 1st Lt. Michael T. Reilly, 29, of Laguna Hills; Lance Cpl. Gregory L. Michaels, 19, of Tustin and Frenchville, Pa.; Lance Cpl. Thomas H. Baddeley III, 21, of Tustin and Yardley, Pa., and Cpl. Mark B. Burris, 21, of Tustin and Toronto, Ohio.

On Friday, Rep. Robert E. Badham (R-Newport Beach), who had started a congressional inquiry into the Super Stallion crashes, said that first reports suggested pilot error in Thursday's crash. Also, Badham said, his congressional inquiry probably would show that the Super Stallion has no inherent design flaw.

Neither Badham nor Sikorsky representatives could be reached for comment.

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For the Families, It Became Real With Knock at the Door

By HEIDI EVANS, Times Staff Writer

It is every parent's worst fear. The unexpected rap on the door from two men in uniform.

On Friday morning, in at least five small American cities, the same eerie scene repeated itself, as pairs of Marine Corps officers brought news of death to the families of five crewmen who died in a fiery helicopter crash while performing routine maneuvers near the Salton Sea.

"When I opened the door yesterday morning and saw those two Marines there dressed in blue, I knew from my own experience in the military there was something wrong. I knew he had been killed or something," said Glen Burris, whose 21-year-old son, Mark, was the crew chief aboard the Tustin-based Super Stallion chopper which slammed to the desert ground Thursday night.

'It Was Reality'

"We're just now realizing what has happened," the subdued father said Saturday from Toronto, Ohio. "Yesterday was just numb. Today we found it was reality."

Burris described his son as "gutsy," a happy-go-lucky kid who would "run in the door, pick you up, spin ya 'round, give you a big kiss, put ya down and keep on going. His mother just loved it. Those two were real good buddies." The younger Burris had spent four years in the Marines.

His close friend, 19-year-old Gregory L. Michaels, was also on board the doomed aircraft. His parents first heard about the crash on the radio in their rural hometown of Frenchville, Pa. But the young Marine's mother, Margaret Michaels, said it wasn't until 10:30 a.m. when two Marines appeared on her doorstep that she realized something was amiss.

"When we seen them at the door, we knew."

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A High-Living Hustler's Last Payoff Is Delivered in Bullets

By JANE APPLGATE and MARK LANDSBAUM, Times Staff Writers

Jimmy Lee Casino's world was shattering around him.

U.S. Internal Revenue Service agents were days away from padlocking his primary source of income—the Mustang, a Santa Ana topless bar—because of unpaid payroll taxes.

The Mustang's lease was to expire in February, according to bankruptcy records, and Casino owed thousands of dollars to his landlord and other creditors.

Casino also owed \$302,000 to a group of investors in his failed chain of hot dog stands, and a Los Angeles Superior Court judge was ready to ship him off to state prison for five years if he missed a Jan. 27 deadline for paying the debt. The thought of returning to prison terrified Casino, said Los Angeles County Deputy Dist. Atty. Diane L. Vezzani.

The real terror came on New Year's Day, however, when two intruders broke into Casino's Buena Park luxury condominium and shot him in the back of the head at close range with a small-caliber weapon. Casino's 22-year-old girlfriend was tied up as the killers stole credit cards, furs, jewelry and Casino's Camaro and Mercedes-Benz.

The killers are at large. Buena Park police thought they had a lead when three men were arrested after Casino's stolen credit cards were used at a San Fernando Valley department store. But the men eventually were released for lack of evidence.

Jimmy Lee Casino was a slick-talking swindler with a penchant for topless dancers and fancy cars. He lived a fast-paced life style, often only a step ahead of the law, and

more than once he lost that one-step advantage. His story offers a glimpse into the seamy side of life under the bright lights.

An ex-convict who served federal prison time for tax evasion, mail fraud and counterfeiting, the 48-year-old Casino was an unforgettable character, his friends and associates agree. They knew him as an attractive man who led people to believe he was a high-powered gangster with ties to organized crime.

"He was good looking and fit, the image of an up-and-coming gangster," said Arcadia private investigator Ray Alerich, a retired Los Angeles County deputy sheriff who met Casino in 1975. "He would supply dancers and models for the nude bars."

He was fond of talking about his connec-

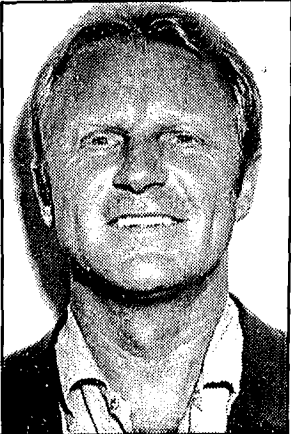
tions. After muscling his way into control of the Classic Cat, a topless bar on Sunset Strip in Hollywood in the early 1970s, said James W. Grodin, a Los Angeles County deputy district attorney, the blond and blue-eyed Casino "would come into the bar and give his gun to the bartender. He told club owners he had a fix with local law enforcement and could do anything he wanted."

And he was a persuasive promoter who could talk people into emptying their wallets for him.

"The guy was unreal," prosecutor Vezzani recalled. "He was a hell of a salesman."

Yet Casino may have been less than he appeared. While he drew the attention of numerous police and government investiga-

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Jimmy Lee Casino

PAYOFF: Gunfire Puts End to High-Living Hustler's Crumbling World

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tors, authorities said Casino's talk of organized-crime connections were hollow boasts. Others who knew him described him as unable to handle his money, an assertion reinforced by records showing that Casino was always in debt and struggled to finance his extravagant life style.

Born James Lee Stockwell and raised in Pomona, he was a high school dropout who earned a diploma while behind bars. He married twice and was the father of six children. Joe A. Dickerson, one of his attorneys, said Casino was very close to his 10-year-old son Shane and, in fact, had spent the day with Shane just before he was killed. Police said Casino dropped off his son and another boy at the second youth's house before returning home, where he was accosted by the killers.

In interviews last week, friends and enemies alike portrayed Casino as a flamboyant, extravagant man who owned a dark-blue Rolls-Royce, but fancied himself a cowboy and dressed in Western-style clothes. His passion for the West was evident in the names of his businesses—the Mustang, Cowboy Enterprises Inc. and Cowboy Hotdog Companies. An avid golfer, Casino spent much of his free time on the Los Coyotes Country Club course adjacent to his home.

Although court records show that the Mustang grossed more than \$150,000 a month, Casino was deeply in debt. The bar had been scrutinized many times by police vice officers who suspected it to be a center for prostitution.

Several Dancers Arrested

Santa Ana police arrested several Mustang dancers on prostitution charges in May, 1984, at a hotel in Orange, but none of the arrests resulted in a conviction.

"This guy was not a crook or a criminal—he had unfortunate business relationships," said Sylvan B. Aronson, Casino's criminal defense attorney and close friend. "He considered himself a cowboy."

Casino's criminal record stretched back to the 1960s, when he was arrested on minor charges that included passing bad checks and driving with a suspended license, according to court records.

In April, 1970, a Los Angeles federal court jury convicted him of 20 counts of mail fraud stemming from the fraudulent use of credit cards; he charged thousands of dollars worth of gasoline, furniture,

clothing and travel expenses and never paid the bills, according to federal court records.

In March, 1971, he was convicted in federal court on counterfeiting charges after he and a group of friends were caught with 2,000 fake \$20 bills. Casino was one of 34 people arrested for possessing about \$100,000 in counterfeit bills, according to court records.

In August, 1972, he was convicted of conspiracy and extortion by a Los Angeles Superior Court jury.

He was sentenced to 10 years in prison for the two federal crimes and 10 years on the state extortion charges. In all, he served three years in federal prisons in Washington state and at Terminal Island Federal Correctional Institution in San Pedro before being paroled to the San Gabriel Valley in November, 1975. His federal parole ended in May, 1979, according to court records. He was allowed to serve the state sentence concurrently while in federal prison.

Plush Spa in Fullerton

After he was released from prison, Casino worked at health spas in Las Vegas, Pomona and Victorville before opening his own, a private club called Top of the Ninth in a Fullerton office building. He boasted to associates that he had received a "federal rehabilitation grant" to open the plush spa, but court records reveal that he borrowed money from several people who later sued him because they were not repaid.

Then he went into hot dogs.

In 1979 and 1980, court records show, Casino collected \$928,000 from about two dozen investors to open a chain of hot dog stands, but spent only \$173,000 on the business, Cowboy Hotdog Companies. As a result of that business effort, he was charged with stealing \$412,000 from 10 people, including a Los Angeles County deputy sheriff, several schoolteachers and a service station owner who lost his business, said Vezzani, who prosecuted Casino.

On Jan. 28, 1986, he pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit grand theft.

"He wasn't doing squat, but he was living high on the hog," Vezzani said. She recalled that he had a big map behind his desk studded with colored pins marking future Cowboy Hotdog locations.

In 1979 and 1980, Casino had a suite of plush offices on Wilshire

'This guy was not a crook or a criminal—he had unfortunate business relationships. He considered himself a cowboy.'

—Sylvan B. Aronson, Casino's defense attorney and close friend

Boulevard in Beverly Hills. He lived nearby in a \$1,200-a-month apartment with his business partner, Mark Hendrix, Vezzani said.

Vezzani said Casino had paid \$110,000 of the \$412,000 he owed in restitution to the investors in the Cowboy Hotdog venture before his death. She said she thought that he would have been going to prison at the end of the month because he had not paid the rest, but Aronson said he believed that Casino would have avoided that fate because "he was making a good-faith effort to pay."

Casino, who drank Coca-Cola while his guests drank alcohol, entertained frequently at Pips, a private club and discotheque in Beverly Hills. In May, 1980, he spent \$3,205 at Pips, according to checks included in court records.

Home Foreclosed

Vezzani said Casino left Los Angeles and moved to Orange County during the district attorney's investigation into the hot dog operation. He bought a \$1.3-million house on East Crescent Drive in Anaheim Hills, and the home be-

came a haven for dancers from the Mustang, according to local law-enforcement sources. Casino lost the house in a foreclosure, according to county property records.

Casino set up Fortune Investment Inc., the corporation that owned the Mustang, on Harbor Boulevard in Santa Ana, and the company obtained a liquor license in 1980. At least one creditor in bankruptcy proceedings alleged that Casino used the proceeds from sales of non-existent hot dog franchises to help establish the Mustang.

In 1982 and 1983, Casino, through Fortune Investment, borrowed \$140,000 from Yvonne Hines, girlfriend of C.W. (Bill) Carroll, an Orange County loan broker, according to court records. Hines later sued Casino to get the money back, alleging that he was skimming cash profits from the Mustang.

"I have learned that the bulk of cash receipts from the operation of the Mustang Club are removed by Mr. Casino without maintenance of any records as to the amounts or their disposition," Carroll said in a

declaration written May 15, 1985, and filed in Orange County Superior Court.

Michael O. Walsh, who is listed in corporate papers as the sole stockholder of Fortune Investment, said in 1986 bankruptcy proceedings that the company paid \$20,000 a month to Casino under a "consulting and management agreement."

In June, 1985, Fortune Investment filed for bankruptcy protection, but the case was dismissed on Oct. 11, 1985.

The corporation filed a second bankruptcy petition on Feb. 7, 1986. That case was dismissed on Aug. 13, 1986. A third petition was filed Jan. 7, listing \$500,000 in assets and \$607,192 in liabilities.

Bankruptcies Called Ruses

Creditors complained that the numerous bankruptcy filings have been ruses to prevent them from collecting debts from Casino while he continued to draw huge amounts of cash from the operation.

A bankruptcy analyst of the U.S. Trustee's office found in June, 1986, that, despite the ongoing bankruptcy, "Walsh and James Casino are not only continuing to draw compensation without the approval of the U.S. Trustee," but that Casino was paid \$43,500 during one three-month period.

Law-enforcement officials say Casino hid his ownership in the Mustang because, as an ex-convict, he could not obtain a liquor license. But not everyone is willing to agree that Casino had an ownership in-

terest in the Mustang.

"A lot of people thought Jim owned the club, but all the shares are in my name," Walsh, Casino's friend and bodyguard, said in an interview Friday.

No matter who owned it, the Mustang owed nearly \$500,000 in back taxes to the IRS, according to bankruptcy court records. The IRS had placed a lien on the bar's liquor license, according to Buena Park police.

"The bar was only a few days away from being closed down [by the IRS]," said Buena Park Police spokesman Terry Brannum.

On the afternoon of his death, Casino played golf with Walsh.

"He never told me about any threats. He was in a pretty good mood that day," said Walsh, who was a friend and business associate of Casino's for 12 years. "He was a great person. He loaned out a lot of money. He was always borrowing from Peter to pay Paul."

"He didn't really know how to manage money."

In the view of Santa Ana attorney Meir J. Westreich, who has represented clients to whom Casino owed money, the surprising thing about his death was that the killers could penetrate the blanket of security he maintained around himself.

"It's amazing they were able to get to him that easily," Westreich said. "He has bodyguards around him all the time."

Times staff writer Bill Farr contributed to this story.

State Industrial Board Looking for Advisers

The California Industrial Welfare Commission is looking for candidates to serve on five advisory panels. One panel, called wage boards, will study and make recommendations on the state's minimum wage and matters related to it.

The other four boards will consider current exemptions in commission orders for persons employed in administrative, executive or professional capacities. The orders cover such areas as manufacturing industry and professional, technical, clerical and mechanical occupations, the public housekeeping industry and the amusement and recreation industry.

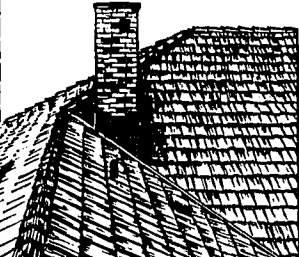
These four boards will also study and make recommendations on issues regarding hours and days of work, including but not necessarily limited to flexible daily schedules, and recommendations related to

alternative workweek agreements.

The boards will consist of an equal number of employer and employee representatives plus a non-voting chairperson.

Members will be expected to serve for two consecutive days, staggered during the year. Members will be paid \$100 plus travel expenses for each day. Nomination forms can be obtained from the Industrial Welfare Commission, P.O. Box 603, San Francisco 94101, or by calling (415) 557-2590.

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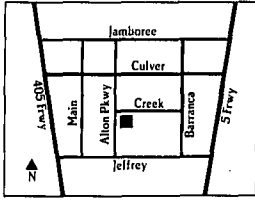
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